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East on West

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East on West

by R. L. Reid

WHEN a wanderer walks from his white-picketed house and seeks the secrets found behind the shuttered windows of the world, he needs no map to guide his footsteps. For all streets are as one street, all people are parts of one person, all cities are the same. And the life of the wanderer becomes the map of the world, and when he dies, north becomes south, east is folded on west, and the world itself has died. But this is the life of the wanderer: to make that map complete with landmarks and main routes, and to show the way to those who ask.

Saul was a wanderer, this time beating the snows by leaving straight south from the blizzard winds, and cutting straight west to the coast, specifically San Diego, where he found a quiet slat bench at the top of the hundred-foot drop overlooking the tawny beach which stretched to a white blending of pale sky and perspective beach, all this beneath the afternoon glow of a golden sun, and sky with snow flecks of clouds; always in the distance, dots of sea gulls growing to loud and rhythmic squawks, and soaring like feathers drifting from the clouds.

Saul read for hours, occasionally looking up at the people passing, who were walking rapidly on important errands,

not even seeing (or if seeing, not caring about it) the whole civilizations of ants they crunched into flatness.

People, yes people. Businessmen staring at the mystery of the ocean before going home to seek the chemical nirvana of alcohol or tranquilizers. Saturdaynight bohemians, constantly looking to see if someone was watching them in their attempts to be unique in their carefully unkept appearance. People, yes, people. People falling into patterns. People creating those patterns unconsciously, or falling into patterns by trying not to fall into patterns. (Like the guy in the psych textbooks who is latently homosexual, who swears he can spot a homosexual right off, due to certain mannerisms they have and such, but who, by his projection, creates a pattern of himself as being a frustrated homo afraid of people pointing at him. He becomes a pattern.) People projecting, rationalizing, running. People.

But now, with the golden sun sinking into a pool of blood on the flaming horizon, silence guarded the sea-shore, letting only the distant hiss and roar of the charging sea come through the stillness.

And Saul watched the sinking sun pull darkness after the light. Saul watched the growing shadows of the rolling waves, blue blending to black until only the flicker of white-caps showed the motion of the sea. Saul did not hear or see the girl who sat beside him.

Her voice did not intrude or break the evening peacefulness. The breathing of the sea complemented her voice which did not break the sound of the silent night that exists alone for those who listen for it.

"I hope you don't mind my sitting here. Coming so suddenly. I always come here in the evening, right to this very bench. Please don't mind?"

—No, no, Saul did not mind. It was time for him to leave again.

"Oh, please don't go. I don't want you to leave because I came. Please stay. I'll leave in just a few minutes."

There was something in her voice. Something like wind chimes tinkling in a quiet forest.

—Yes, yes, Saul would stay. Why did she come to this spot?

"I always have, ever since I was a wee, little girl." Her

voice smiled and Saul relaxed. "I like it here because it's quiet. Quiet from the world, I mean."

—And is the world such a horrid place that you must come here for escape?

"Oh, no. The world is a wonderful place and this spot is just one small part of it."

—And then you say that the world is good. You say that you enjoy the threat of annihilation, that you are content to live with smiling lies. . . . Saul's words were rocking in satire and he enjoyed his sarcasm.

But the girl's voice changed, changed from the voice that any stranger would have heard, and spoke again to Saul.

"You have a pain, a deep pain. And you can see things only through the tears of that pain."

Saul's spirit shuddered at those words. He listened to the night and heard the hollow humming of the city. He tightened his muscles and his fists began to tremble. But he shuddered at her words.

In that moment of her speaking truth to Saul, the stranger, the years between their friendship melted to a moment. And they were no longer strangers.

—Pain? Yes, pain. But pain too tight for human words. Describe the feeling of a burn on the palm of a hand, and transmit that feeling to the soul. A Halloween mask in Christmas wrapping. This was Saul's pain.

"If you look for pain, it will find you. I am alone. Three years ago, I was left with my home and the sea. Yet I never weep. I see beauty in each breathing minute, each day brings a new wonder to appreciate. God has sent me these moments to compensate for the things I could never know." When she spoke the title, God, she spoke it plainly. Saul spoke it with quotation marks.

—And do you believe "God" to be all-good?

"Of course. God is the world. I find happiness in God, and in every instant of the universe." Her voice rose in persuasive enthusiasm. "Can't you see? The joy in all of life, the happiness of peace by the sea, can't you see the glory of the writings of the past, the majestic ecstasy of the classics, can't you see these things?"

—Yes, Saul could see these things. And many more. But why could she be happy? Saul had known many people claim-

ing happiness and had seen their shaking laughter as they tried to play the part. Why?

"I have no reason I can speak of. Perhaps I'm the only type of person who can be happy, just as your type can only find sadness in life. If we could know the difference between us, we could understand what happiness and sadness really are. And then we would both live happily ever after." Her voice went tripping gaily over her words. "But I must leave now. I have enjoyed my evening moment by the sea, and must run away to my castle in the air." Her voice settled; and then, seriously — "Will I be able to speak to you again? Please say yes?"

— No, Saul would have to leave. There were appointments that must be kept, appointments as yet unknown, but unbreakable.

"Good bye, then. I come here every evening. Good bye."

She rose, staring almost stiffly out to sea, and turned sharply, almost militarily away from Saul. Saul watched the girl walk away from him, watched her hair spring lightly with each step, heard the clicking of her falling footsteps as she walked into the darkness. He watched the free and even arc of her slender cane as it dotted her leaving with a small tap on either side of the walk, her steps with an even stride carrying her down the center of the sidewalk. He watched her long after the silence had sifted behind her, gradually shielding her figure and finally shrouding the sound of her tapping.

Saul, the wanderer, arose and walked away, walked to bring the north to the south and fold east on west. He walked into the darkness. But the darkness did not cover him.